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AUTHOR Myers, Karen A.; Bailey, Cheryl L.
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated college student involvement in campus religious organizations to determine the functioning of organizational and interpersonal communication. Data were elicited through open-ended interviews with 16 members of a Catholic student center at a state university in the Midwest. Interviews were also conducted with the director, assistant director, and secretary to obtain background information about the center and its purpose. Results revealed two layers of relationships within the organization: a member identity cluster and a member authority cluster. The first consisted of the social/emotional relationships that made up the community and allowed it to achieve its goal of emotional and spiritual development of community members. These relationships revolved around individual member identity which was influenced by a number of factors, and, in turn, influenced a number of others. The second concerned the task structure and functioning of the organization. The key appeared to be the use of member authority in the delegation of tasks and establishment of task role expectations. Task role expectations differed a great deal among members, which led to differing emphases on effective completion of tasks. Findings suggest practical applications for college student personnel concerned with new student retention and for individuals involved in campus ministry. Additional research into student dissatisfaction appears to be called for. (Two figures depicting the Member Identity and Member Authority clusters are included.) (KEH)

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Member Involvement in a Student Religious Organization: A Qualitative Analysis

Karen A. Myers

Cheryl L. Bailey

Communication Arts and Sciences
Western Illinois University
Macomb, IL 61455
(309) 298-1507

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Abstract

Interviews with members of a student religious center were recorded, and incidents were categorized and compared. Relationships among categories revealed two theoretical clusters: the member identity cluster and the member authority cluster. Theory generated from this study provides insight into student involvement in campus religious organizations.

MEMBER INVOLVEMENT IN A STUDENT RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATION: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

This study is an investigation of organizational and interpersonal communication in a student religious center. The purpose of this research effort was to provide exploratory information about the functioning of such an organization. Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews conducted with organization members. Analysis of the data yielded fourteen categories and two category clusters -- a member identity cluster and a member authority cluster.

The grounded theory approach to theory generation is proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a particularly useful means of exploratory investigation, though not limited to that function. This approach allows data to generate theory, thus resulting in theory which is grounded in data. Categories emerge from the data through the constant comparative method of analysis in which each unit of data (incident) is compared to other incidents in a category. This comparison elicits properties of each category as well as relationships among categories. This approach has been applied to the study of organizations by Browning (1978) and to the study of religious organizations (congregations) by Keim (1988). Given the lack of existing communication literature on student involvement in campus religious organizations, the grounded theory approach provides an opportunity to construct an information

base about a range of individual and organizational variables which influence student participation in campus religious groups and to examine relationships among those variables.

METHOD

Research Setting

The setting for this study was a Catholic student center of a state university in the Midwest. The center is owned by the Catholic diocese and funded by the diocese, parents' booster club, collections, and donations. Students are not required to be Catholic in order to attend or become involved in the center.

The Catholic center originated on the campus in the 1950's. The present building, constructed in 1978, consists of two chapels, office area, lounge, meeting rooms, and two apartments (one houses two students and the other is the director's living quarters). The staff is comprised of a director (priest), an assistant director (sister), and a part-time secretary. Two male students who live at the center maintain the facility with the help of 15 to 20 student volunteers. Masses are attended by 400 to 500 students per week, and the center serves approximately 3000 students per year. Types of services offered by the center include Mass, counseling, prayer groups, religion classes, and social gatherings. It also provides a place for private prayer and

worship.

Data Gathering

Sixteen (16) members were interviewed in order to provide data for this project. The assistant director and the two male residents at the center provided the names of seventeen (17) students who could be considered the "core" of the organization (i.e., those who serve on the Council and committees, help maintain the center, and spend a considerable amount of time at the center). Sixteen (16) of those students were available for interviews. There were seven (7) males and nine (9) females, and each academic level was represented (freshman through graduate student).

Open-ended interviews were conducted during which interviewees were asked to explain how and why they first came to the center, why they continue to come back, and what they do while they are there. Follow-up questions were asked to generate elaboration. Interviews were audiotaped and varied in length from 1 to 2 1/2 hours. Notes were taken during the interviews to aid the researchers in the analysis process.

Interviews were also conducted with the director, assistant director, and secretary in order to obtain background information regarding the center and its purpose. Their roles and relationships with the students were also discussed.

The center was observed on several occasions and

informational bulletins distributed at Masses were examined. Written records and historical material were unavailable due to the fact that these particular types of information are nonexistent. According to the assistant director, "We have an oral history. We're in the primitive stages of organization."

Data Analysis

The data collected were coded following the guidelines set forth by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The first step in data analysis was to determine what constituted an incident. It was agreed upon that an incident would be any complete thought dealing with one and the same subject, including any examples or stories used to illustrate a point. These incidents were placed into categories using the constant comparative method. Incidents with like characteristics were labeled or categorized, and the number appearing in each category was determined. The fourteen (14) categories derived from the data were given descriptive labels and are presented below. They are listed according to the number of incidents in each (highest to lowest).

Member Identity (88 incidents) The incidents in this category describe how the members see themselves regarding attitudes, beliefs, and values. Most students expressed a need to be with others, to be themselves, to be accepted, and to serve those less fortunate. Most see themselves as

religious and willing to trust. Several described themselves as outgoing, self-motivated, and concerned about the welfare of the center and its members.

One member described himself and his feelings toward the center this way: "I believe in God and I feel closer to God when I help out at the center. I like helping others. ... I need to talk about spiritual things from time to time and I can do this there." When describing his/her "religious" self, one student said, "To me religious means pious and holy, so I don't consider myself religious." Another student commented, "Religious means that God is in your life daily, within yourself, and I see myself as a religious person."

Community Characteristics (64 incidents) How each member sees the other members in the "core" group are incidents in this category. Open, friendly, honest, and trustworthy were frequently used terms. One student described the community in this way: "They all believe in God, and, even though they like to have fun like all kids, they believe the same things I do." Other comments were as follows: "They're friendly. and they don't put on an act. They're real and honest, not fake." "They're not out for their own gain." "Not all are Catholics. You don't have to be Catholic to go there." "There may be some backstabbing, but, if confronted, they wouldn't be afraid to admit what they said."

Integration (46 incidents) This category summarizes

members' perceptions of why they first came to the center and/or how they became involved in the center's activities. Mass was the main reason why members first came to the center and retreat seemed to draw members closer to one another, thus bringing them back to become more involved. Friends at the center play an important role in a member's integration process as well.

Community Mission (41 incidents) "The purpose of the center is to build a community with Catholics ... to bring God to people." "It's a place to gather with people who have the same morals ... a place to worship together." "It's a student center first, then Catholic. Denomination isn't really important." It's a place to go where there's no pressure." "It's a home away from home."

The above statements describe some students' perceptions of the purpose of the organization. Overall, the center's mission seemed to be fairly clear and well-defined in the minds of its members. They see it as a student center, a place which promotes peace, togetherness, love, acceptance, and Christianity -- a place to go for support, assistance, counseling, and community.

Member Authority (39 incidents) This category contains members' perceptions of authority within the organization (i.e., their own and that of the directors). Unanimously they agreed that Father and Sister let the students run the

center and the Council. One student exspressed it this way: "They don't run the meetings; one of us does. Neither Father nor Sister tries to exercise a lot of command or take a lot of authority. They're there for leadership guidance ... but they don't take over." Another said, "Sister and Father don't tell you what to do; they don't preach." "I see Father as an authority figure," stated another, "but he's more of a friend than he is a boss." One member summed it up like this: "He (Father) lets me run into my own walls."

A few members expressed concern regarding the absence of authority. "The nun and the priest don't make people accountable. The priest says, 'If it doesn't get done, it doesn't get done.'" "Sometimes I wish they'd assert more authority than they do (on Council). ... They try to stay out of our way when it comes to the center's stuff 'cause they want the students to do it."

Community Atmosphere (37 incidents) Caring, accepting, welcoming, warm, and "homey" were repeated incidents in this category. Some members' descriptions are as follows: "It's easy-going, laid back, comfortable, and secure." "It's a safe environment ... a good place to begin to get involved in the university. It's a religious environment when you want it to be. You can act like you want. It's not strict." One student emphasized that Masses there are not as conservative as those in a hometown church. "Masses are liberal and laid

back. We hold hands during the Our Father, and Sister gives the homilies." Some students see the atmosphere as "overwhelming", as one member explained, "Every time you go there, they try to get you to do something." Another commented, "Some people are too willing to help. They pounce on you when you walk in the door."

Ministerial Relationships (37 incidents) The following quotations describe several members' relationships with the directors. "I can talk to Father or Sister about anything." "Father is easy to talk to." "Sister had a lot to do with my beginning to trust others." "Sister cares. She's always on me about my health." "Father is so compassionate." "Sister and Father are fun to be around." "They're magnetic."

These incidents describe each student's personal relationship with the directors. All students expressed positive feelings toward both directors; however, each student seemed to express a preference when it comes to private conversations. As one student put it, "Most people who come here regularly at some point will confide in Sister or Father, ... and once you go to the priest, you tend not to usually go to the nun or vice versa. You kinda get in with one better, have a better rapport -- you just feel more comfortable."

Primary Relationships (33 incidents) The incidents in this category indicate whether or not the student's closest friends are in or outside of the center's "core" group. These

units varied. Half of the interviewees indicated that their best friends at college were members of the "core" group. The statement, "I spend almost all of my free time at the center and all of my friends are there" was echoed by several students. The other half indicated that most of their best friends were outside of this group. The following statement summarizes their answers: "I like the people at the center and I can talk to them, but my best friends are outside of the center." Another familiar theme which emerged here revealed that juniors and seniors tended to have more primary relationships with people outside of the organization. As one student said, "The longer I'm in school, the more people I meet around campus. I've gotten to be really good friends with some people in other groups and organizations."

Task Groups (28 incidents) The incidents in this category describe those subgroups within the "core" group which tend to form based on responsibilities and tasks at hand. All interviewees recognized these particular task groups (e.g., Council, choir, classes, prayer and outreach groups), but some saw a more defined distinction between or among these groups. "I find the Council is a more elite group. They tend to stay together ... and it's hard to get to know some of them." "Council is definitely one group, then there are smaller groups." "Council consists of ten people plus the nun and the priest ... and three or four of us are

the shakers and the movers ... who want to get things done. We (the Council) want to be visible so we can help people ... but we don't want to be a clique. I'd love to know how other people feel who aren't on Council, if they feel like the rest of us -- like we're a clique. It always does scare us because we don't want to be a clique."

Task Role Performance (28 incidents) The incidents in this category represent appraisals of jobs and responsibilities taken on by "core" members. Council seemed to be the major topic in this category. Those not on Council had little to say about task performance, although two of them did express desire to be on Council. Apparently, it is the duty of each Council member to carry out his/her delegated and/or chosen tasks, and members seemed to freely express performance evaluations regarding these tasks.

A few students enjoy the Council meetings and are pleased with Council's progress. "Meetings are a lot of fun. They're eighty percent joking." "They're a good time. When people get uptight, we loosen them up. ... Our Outreach Program is the big thing right now. ... There are two groups and so far our group has gone out twice to the residence halls ... and it's gone over really well."

Some members, however, seem to have opposing viewpoints. "To be quite honest, they (the meetings) aren't run effectively. ... I'd rather have less people who are more

committed than ten people who just come for an hour every week and joke around. ... We talk, talk, talk on Council and no follow-through. ... No one feels accountable. I feel responsible, and some of us feel like we're being used." Some other students voiced similar opinions. "We do anything that needs to be done to keep the center going. There is a lot of responsibility involved." "Some of us feel like we do most of the work."

Dissatisfaction with Council was expressed quite candidly by this student: "We divided into two groups for the Outreach Program, and one group got the project done and our group has done zero. ... We spent all those hours in meetings ... and haven't done anything. It's frustrating. ... I dread those meetings. They draw things out forever. They're not productive. ... It's hard to believe it's a church group -- the bickering! Nobody's flexible. Some people do so much and some people do so little."

Community Image (27 incidents) This category is comprised of the incidents which describe the students' perceptions of how outsiders see the organization and its members. Two main themes emerged. One theme was expressed this way: "Probably people think we're religious before they get to know us. But once they get to know everybody, then they know we're normal and a lot of fun." The other theme entailed how other Catholics viewed the organization. As one

member stated, "I think we seem religious most of the time by non-Catholics, but some Catholics see us as too liberal." Another member supported the latter statement with this comment: "People come here for community. If they just want religion, they go to the local parish church."

Ministerial Image (27 incidents) This category reveals the students' descriptions of the directors. Most see them as role models, "guiding forces", and friends who relate well to college students. They are described as supportive, comforting, and practical with liberal attitudes. One student's description is as follows: "Father and Sister are extremely laid back. They set a moral example ... they are accepting ... and don't condemn you for something you did wrong." Another commented, "They're so open-minded ... and receptive." One member described them in two words: "They're family."

Social Groups (24 incidents) The incidents in this category describe those subgroups within the "core" group which form for social reasons or friendship. All interviewees concurred that these social groups exist. One described them this way: "There are groups within groups within groups, some pairing, but we all get along within the larger group. There are no cliques." Another agreed, "There are some close friendships in the "core" group, but there aren't any cliques. We all blend together ... and it's comfortable." Some had

slightly differing opinions. "I think there's a popular group and a not-so-popular group. ... I feel uncomfortable about barging into other small groups." One student looked at the membership this way: "It's all small groups, and I don't know most of them. ... The small groups won't come up to the other small groups at parties and functions."

Task Role Expectations (14 incidents) The incidents here describe what job or responsibility expectations members think are placed upon them by others. Almost all units in this category were directed at Council, and many of the expectations appeared to be unspoken ones. For example, "Each Council member chooses a specific job. There's no real pressure on you to do it." Another had a similar response: "It's your job. No one really bothers you about it." Referring to meetings one said, "We know when we have to stop joking and get some work done. ... I don't feel committed (to the center), but I know others are counting on me so I go." Another remarked, "We haven't seen each other in a week, so Tuesday night is the time we meet, and I figure we're gonna have some fun."

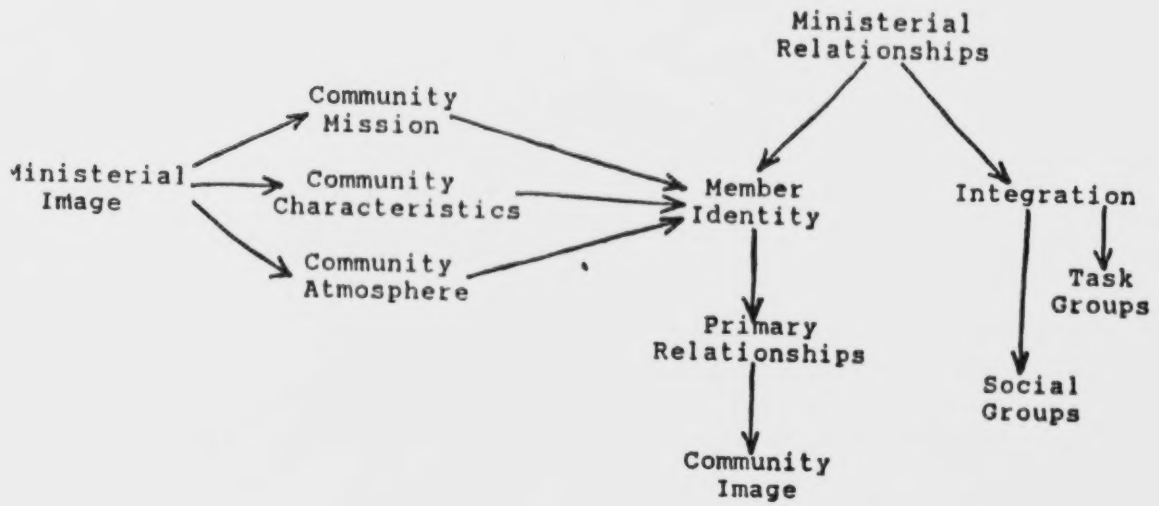
Several students, however, did feel an obligation to the organization. As one member put it, "I don't like to go to the Council meetings, but I feel as if I have to. I'm committed to go. ... People there take on roles (task), and they expect others to do it to." Council aside, one member

described her task expectation this way: "I feel obligated to the choir so I go to practice, but it's not a burden. I enjoy it."

THEORY GENERATION

Through application of the constant comparative method of analysis, dimensions of these categories emerged which suggested relationships among them. Two major category systems became apparent: the member identity cluster and the member authority cluster.

Figure 1. The Member Identity Cluster



Member Identity Cluster

The member identity cluster describes factors which characterize the community, influence the development of individual member identity, and influence the integration of the member of the community.

Ministerial Image directly influences Community Mission, Community Characteristics, and Community Atmosphere. The members' perceptions of the director and assistant director set the direction and tone of the organization. Their images as role models also allow them to set examples of behavior for community members. No formal statement of mission exists; however, member descriptions of the purpose of the center share many common themes derived from the goals and priorities evidenced in the behavior of the directors. Characteristics of community members are influenced in much the same way. Many of the member descriptions of community characteristics are similar to the descriptions of director characteristics (e.g., "real", "not judgmental", "accepting"). This similarity can be attributed to ministerial image in two ways. First, the image of the directors as open, accepting, warm, etc. likely appeals to potential community members with similar characteristics. Also, this image, again, provides a model which community members report as influential in their own development of these characteristics. Finally, members view the directors as having much influence on the climate of

the community. The amount of influence members attribute to the directors range from "helping to set" the atmosphere to complete responsibility -- "Father and Sister set the atmosphere" -- for creation of the climate.

Community Mission, Community Characteristics, and Community Atmosphere all directly influence individual Member Identity. The community mission plays an important part in helping the member to define him/herself in terms of the purpose of the center by providing the member with goals for which to strive, particularly those of emotional and spiritual development. The community characteristics also influence the member's identification of self within the community by providing a reference group with whom the member can identify, and by providing support and encouragement in the member's endeavor to develop individual capabilities and identity. This relationship is closely related to the relationship between community atmosphere and member identity. The atmosphere, characterized as flexible, relaxed, and supportive, allows for free exploration and development of the individual's identity.

Member Identity directly affects member Integration in that the values, attitudes, and priorities held by an individual influence his/her choice of activities within the community and desired level of involvement in the community.

Ministerial Relationships have a critical direct

influence on the Integration of the individual into the community. Virtually every member cited the influence of one or both of the directors in their decision to return to the center or to become more involved in center activities.

Member Identity directly influences the development of Primary Relationships, both inside and outside of the community. A consistent pattern of relationship development emerged in which relationships with community members are more numerous and more significant early in the individual's membership in the community. Over time, the number and significance of the community relationships tend to decrease as the development of relationships with non-community members increases. Members believe that as they become acquainted with more people on campus, the need for relationships with other community members (which is critical at the time of their initial contact with the center) is reduced.

Primary Relationships also affect the identity of the student as a part of the community. Community Image changes with development of primary relationships outside the community. Members indicate that non-community members perceive them as "religious" until they "get to know" them. As primary relationships outside the community develop, it seems that perceptions of members held by those outside the community change.

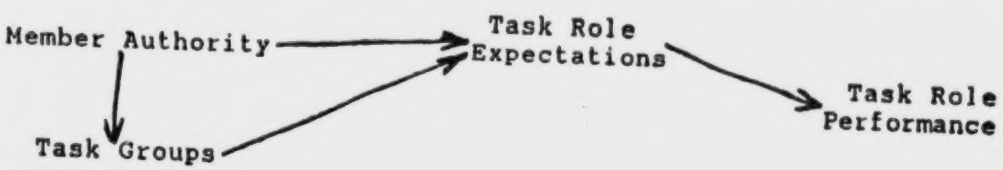
Finally, Integration into the community directly affects

the inclusion of the member in Task and/or Social Groups within the community. Further involvement in community activities leads to membership in task groups (such as Council) for some and memberships in social groups for all. Involvement in the community, formal or informal, is viewed as a prerequisite for inclusion in task groups. Social groups develop for a variety of reasons and are informal groups of friends who develop closer relationships within the community.

Member Identity Cluster Summary

1. Ministerial Image directly affects Community Mission, Community Characteristics, and Community Atmosphere.
2. Community Mission, Community Characteristics, and Community Atmosphere affect Member Identity.
3. Member Identity directly affects Integration.
4. Ministerial Relationships directly affect Integration.
5. Member Identity directly affects Primary Relationships.
6. Primary Relationships directly affect Community Image.
7. Integration directly affects Task and Social Groups.

Figure 2. The Member Authority Cluster



Member Authority Cluster

The member authority cluster emerged as a system of categories emphasized by community members as a "problem area". Members tended to describe those experiences related to the member identity cluster as positive ones. Many members, however, expressed some dissatisfaction with the use of member authority in the delegation and completion tasks.

Member Authority directly influences Task Groups, since member authority is the primary means through which task structures are created and assigned duties. The center's Council members are authorized to appoint all new Council members themselves. The Council is also responsible for selection of Council members to take charge of various areas such as recruiting office sitters, Eucharistic ministers, readers, etc.

Member Authority also directly influences Task Role Expectations. Not only are community members (particularly the Council) responsible for setting up task structures, they are autonomous in establishing standards for completion of tasks as well. Every member of the center's Council emphasized that the directors allow the Council (and the community in general) almost total control in the management of the center.

Task Groups also directly influence Task Role Expectations. Although the Council is the "governing body"

of the center, the task group members also establish task role expectations for themselves and others in the group. Members of individual task groups such as the choir expressed expectations for their performance and the performance of others in that group which were established by those individuals, not the Council.

Finally, Task Role Expectations directly affect Task Role Performance. Many community members expressed dissatisfaction with individual and group performance of tasks. Some discuss the lack of effective task performance but did not view it as a problem. Many members discussed the lack of productivity which exists in the Council and on the part of individuals and task groups. Some spoke of this lack as a problem; others considered it a normal occurrence to which others overreacted. The difference in views seems to lie in the expectations held by the individual. Those who see Council meetings as social functions are not concerned about the productivity of those meetings. Those who view them as business functions are upset when they yield little productivity. Virtually all members who are unhappy with the functioning of the Council expressed a desire for the exertion of more authority by the center directors and less authority by community members in leading Council activities.

Member Authority Cluster Summary

1. Member Authority directly affects Task Groups.

2. Member Authority directly affects Task Role Expectations.
3. Task Groups directly affect Task Role Expectations.
4. Task Role Expectations directly affect Task Role Performance.

DISCUSSION

The categories and clusters which emerged in this analysis indicate two layers of relationships within the organization. One layer consists of the social/emotional relationships that make up the community and allow it to achieve its goal of emotional and spiritual development of community members. These relationships revolve around individual member identity which is influenced by a number of factors, and, in turn, influences a number of others. The second layer concerns the task structure and functioning of the organization. The key seems to be the use of member authority in the delegation of tasks and establishment of task role expectations. Task role expectations differ a great deal among members which leads to differing emphases on effective completion of tasks.

These perceptions offer useful information for practical application in a least two areas. First, the usefulness of this community in helping students new to the campus

establish important relationships with other students and with center directors should interest college student personnel concerned with new student retention. Much attention has been focused in recent years on those factors which influence college freshmen to remain at school. Some of the factors emphasized in new student orientation programs are values clarification and interpersonal relationship development (Gordon & Grites, 1984). In the case of the religious center studied here, the center seems to provide an environment which allows such processes to occur. Thus, the role of auxiliary university organizations in helping students to develop relationships and gain support from other students in adjusting to campus life might be examined further as a useful supplement to college orientation programs.

The information gained here might also be useful to those involved in campus ministry. The members interviewed seemed quite satisfied with the center community as a place where they are supported by the community and directors in their emotional and spiritual development. Some members, however, are not satisfied with the community's productivity. The autonomy given the members seems to allow them to establish a climate and rapport that creates a supportive and comfortable setting in which to develop important relationships and encourage development of each member. This climate, however, does not seem conducive to effective task

functioning. This is not to say that member autonomy is a negative factor, but simply that those involved in campus ministry organizations (and perhaps other student groups) might wish to consider the priorities and needs of their own group when making decisions concerning the delegation of authority within the organization.

The observations offered here might also be of interest to campus ministry and college student personnel in providing insight into the religious behavior of college students. Although the present study clearly is limited in its immediate application to college students in general (since only one group was examined here), this study does have heuristic value in its consideration of students' actual religious involvement and behavior. This is an area in need of investigation given the lack of existing information about it. Some literature exists on religious attitudes of college students (Manese & Sedlacek, 1985; McAllister, 1985), but student involvement in religious organizations apparently has not been investigated by communication researchers.

The exploratory nature of this study generates numerous possibilities for future research. The present findings could be corroborated with the utilization of other data gathering techniques (e.g., surveys, questionnaires, participant observation, follow-up interviews, etc.) using the same sample. Of particular value might be an investigation into

the Council organization itself, since our findings indicated much dissatisfaction within that group. Comparative studies could be undertaken focusing on another student religious organization on the same campus and by investigating other student Catholic centers at different universities. Finally, a look at the campus ministers' roles in religious organizations, their degree of authority and its effects on student satisfaction might elicit valuable information regarding college student involvement in campus religious organizations.

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